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Taking Idaho by storm

Gov. Jim Risch didn't waste any time in office

Risch knew his time as governor would be short. He hit the ground running and never looked back.

It doesn't take long to figure out that Idaho's governor isn't interested in this line of questioning. It's too soon, and there's too much to do. It's Dec. 7, and Jim Risch isn't ready to analyze his frenetic seven-month run as Idaho's chief executive. Twenty-four days remain, and he doesn't want to waste any of them.

Queries about legacy, history and the future bounce off him like so many dust particles. He answers by not answering and does so quickly, skillfully and politely.

It's not that Risch isn't interested in history, his legacy or the future, but time constraints have forced Idaho's governor to live in the now. Even while sitting at the head of a long desk in his spacious office on the second floor of the Statehouse, Risch's huge energy and formidable confidence infuse everyone around him with a sense of preparedness.

Spokesman Brad Hoaglund and Chief of Staff John Sandy look as though they're taking a deep breath before Risch launches them into the next adventure. Problem solving, not pontification, is this governor's thing. Risch ends the interview. Sandy and Hoaglund leap to attention as Risch rises quickly from his seat and heads for the door at his usual brisk pace. Stopping suddenly, he turns back and calls out: "Don't write the epithet yet. We've still got things to do."

Former newspaper editor and lobbyist Steve Ahrens watched countless politicians come and go in his three decades on the scene. Two men, Ahrens said, truly understood political power and how to use it: former Gov. Cecil Andrus and Risch. "Beyond all the other people I've known in the system, at all levels," Ahrens said.

Andrus' legacy is secure. Risch's is still in question, something Risch clearly understood when President Bush picked Gov. Dirk Kempthorne as his Interior secretary this past spring. His wife, Vicki, told Risch he didn't seem overly excited about ascending to his dream job. Idaho's lieutenant governor didn't have time to celebrate. Risch was already laying the groundwork for what was to come.

Fortunately, experience had prepared him well. Two years after he graduated from law school, the citizens of Ada County elected Risch prosecutor. Four years later, in 1974, he won a seat in the state Senate. Risch spent 22 of the next 28 years in that body, 18 in GOP leadership positions. He fought the sales tax wars of the 1980s, learned to deal during 24 consecutive years of Democratic governors, and lived and learned through the slow but sure urbanization of Idaho. Most importantly, Risch played an integral role in the makeover of a state government that served a population of 713,000 in 1974 to a state government that serves twice as many people today. "This is stuff you can't read out of a book," Risch said. "You've got to learn by doing it."

Risch was uniquely prepared to hit the ground running. But this wasn't going to be easy. He had to build a staff and figure out exactly what he could accomplish in seven months, no more and certainly no less. His June 2 inaugural address focused on three areas: Idaho's nursing shortage, drugs and property taxes. Risch soon added a fourth area of emphasis, reorganizing the Department of Health and Welfare.

Action based upon fact. Risch organized a task force to deal with Idaho's aging nursing population and promised to fight for training dollars. His budget contains a \$15 million request. Following up on a state audit that called for cohesion between state and community substance abuse efforts, Risch created the office of drug czar and demanded a progress report within 90 days. Another audit discovered low employee morale at the Department of Health and Welfare. Risch fired the director and reorganized the agency's hierarchy. "He wasn't frozen by indecision," said former House Speaker Bruce Newcomb of Burley. "He did what he thought was right."

Risch understood his new powers -- and their limits. He could hire and fire and use the office to focus attention on issues. But he couldn't solve Idaho's looming property tax problem by himself. Risch needed votes in the Idaho Senate to pass a \$219 million shift from property taxes to the sales tax, and nobody in Idaho's recent history was better at counting heads than the new governor.

The criticism was always there when Risch served in the Senate. Autocrat, critics called him. An arm twister. Arrogant. Abrasive. Napoleonic. In his book "Paradox Politics," author Randy Stapilus writes about a freshman legislator's closed-door meeting with Risch in 1980. The freshman emerged teary-eyed and with a changed mind. And so tongues wagged this summer when Risch and a young state senator met to talk about property taxes.

Sen. John McGee, R-Caldwell, had consistently voted against removing school funding from local property taxes during the contentious 2006 legislative session. A proponent of this action, and determined to call a special session only if he had the votes to make it happen, Risch needed McGee. On paper, this was a mismatch.

McGee, born in 1973, vs. Risch, first elected to the Senate in 1974. The wide-eyed neophyte vs. the man Ahrens calls "the ultimate pragmatist." One problem: None of the scuttlebutt was true. A \$100 million state surplus had convinced McGee that property tax relief was doable. McGee requested the meeting with Risch not so much to see what his vote might be worth but simply to take those first baby steps into the murky world of multimillion-dollar politics.

No strong arm was required. The conversation, McGee recalled, quickly turned to how Risch could find the other Senate votes he needed to pass his property tax bill. "Calculated" and "systematic" is how McGee described Risch. "He knew how to make that happen," McGee said.

In 2001, when Risch was contemplating a run for lieutenant governor, he got in touch with a Washington, D.C.-based consultant. Risch needed a poll, empirical data, to show him where he stood in a crowded Republican field. Vicki Risch flipped through one page, another, and a third. The race was wide open. "We're in," she told her husband.

Vicki and Jim Risch are inseparable. Idaho hasn't seen a husband-wife team this prolific since Frank and Bethine Church. Even the picture outside the governor's office is of Team Risch, a break from tradition. "She's here with me all the time," Risch said. "She's got an incredible common sense and political sense."

Risch wasn't governor when he decided not to take on Butch Otter for that job last year, but obviously Team Risch saw something in the data that it didn't like. Looking back through rose-colored glasses, Risch said it was best he chose not to run. Had he been running for governor, Risch said, his seven months on the job would have been viewed through a cynical prism: Is he doing this to help himself get elected or because he truly believes in it?

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Risch experienced some of that in his lieutenant governor race with feisty Democrat Larry LaRocco, "but it was nothing like it would have been had I run for governor," Risch said.

Risch used to lose sleep over this stuff. The problems of the day would rush through his mind as he lay tossing and turning next to Vicki. But the man once referred to as "Feldmarschall von Risch" by a fellow lawmaker has mellowed with age. Now 63 and a grandfather, Risch talks about the "river of life" and going wherever it takes him.

Risch cracks jokes and is capable of wickedly funny banter. Senate Majority Leader Bart Davis of Idaho Falls described Risch as "gregarious, warm and outgoing." His longtime Senate colleague, Laird Noh of Kimberly, said he always saw in Risch a huge reservoir of energy and the ability to make decisions quickly and decisively. But Noh said Risch is much more relaxed these days and completely confident in his ability to do the job.

Noh figures that coming back from defeat -- Risch lost his Senate seat to Democrat Mike Burkett in 1988 -- and the making of his fortune as a trial lawyer erased most traces of doubt in his mind. And Risch was always a step ahead of most people. Ahrens said he would watch Sen. Risch digest information, come to a decision and move on to the next topic before most people even got started. So it seemed a sure bet that once Risch settled on the idea of passing the largest tax shift in Idaho history that he'd find a way to get it done.

Meeting Aug. 25 in a one-day special session, the Legislature removed school funding from local property taxes and raised the sales tax by a penny to pay for it. This was Risch's show. After consulting with Republican legislators behind closed doors, he helped draft the bill, rounded up the needed votes and called the special session.

Democrats decried what they saw as a tax shift from large corporations to the poor. And because Risch made sure that only his bill would be considered, Democrats accused him of hijacking democracy. House Democratic Leader Wendy Jaquet of Ketchum said that in this case, the Risch administration's breakneck pace led Idaho down the wrong path.

"I wonder if he had taken a little more time if he wouldn't have done it differently," Jaquet said.

Not a chance, Risch said. In his mind, vindication came on Election Day when seven of 10 Idaho voters supported the shift. Risch called the advisory vote a "cleansing" and said, "That shut up all the critics." But Senate Democratic Leader Clint Stennett said only time will tell whether Risch's decision was the right one. If the economy falters and school funding destabilizes because it no longer has the property tax security blanket, Stennett said people should look to Risch. He owns the shift now while times are good, Stennett said, and he'll own it down the road if things go sour. "He read the people wrong, and he read the tea leaves wrong," Stennett said.

Risch gave a signal of what was to come the day before he was sworn in as governor. When Ada County commissioners said it was too expensive to repair a bank damaged by the Boise River's high spring flows, acting Gov. Risch ordered the National Guard to take care of it.

Then Risch really got going. When a biodiesel plant exploded in New Plymouth, killing one worker, Team Risch showed up to encourage firefighters and console the plant's owners. When more than 100 elk escaped from a hunting range owned by Upper Valley resident Rex Rammell, Risch waited the required week and then ordered the animals destroyed.

A pattern developed: Risch saw the problem, did his research, made a decision and moved on "without ever looking back," Ahrens said. A battle ensued over a program intended to bring research dollars to Idaho's colleges. Risch stood decades of precedence on its ear by taking administration of the program from the State Board of Education and placing it in the governor's office.

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He proposed new health science buildings in Lewiston and Twin Falls. He earned praise from Democrats by banning mercury emissions in the state, essentially guaranteeing that Idaho will not go the way of Utah and Montana and become a home for coal-fired plants. He signed eight proclamations to improve relations with Idaho's American Indian tribes and filled an enormous backlog of state commission and board slots left vacant by Kempthorne.

Risch even found time to debunk the controversial anti-land-use planning Proposition 2 while publicly supporting Congressman Mike Simpson's efforts to preserve more than 300,000 acres in the Boulder-White Cloud Mountains as wilderness. "I didn't expect anybody as governor to move as fast, to make as many decisions," Noh said.

The Risch era presents a conundrum for political scientists and historians: There's nothing in Idaho's history to compare it with. Risch is Idaho's shortest-tenured governor. He is also the only governor to serve while running for lieutenant governor.

But most distinctive, said retired Boise State University professor Jim Weatherby, was Risch's service-orientated approach to state government. Conservative ideology was less at play than good old-fashioned constituent service and pragmatic decision-making. "The tone he set was one that resonated with Idahoans," Weatherby said. And there's no question that Risch profited from comparisons to his predecessor.

Weatherby said Kempthorne's seven years on the job lulled the state "into a sense of complacency." Jaquet said Risch provided "a huge contrast to the prior administration." Newcomb called Risch's tenure "refreshing following seven years of drought."

The difference, of course, was in how each man viewed the job. While governor, Kempthorne constantly gazed east, seeking greener pastures in the Bush administration. For Risch, however, this was his shot at the gig he'd always coveted, his dream job. Almost everyone Risch encountered came away thinking that he was having the time of his life.

Only the passage of time will determine how Risch compares to the 30 other men who held this office. But now that it's ending, the epithet can be written, and for that we turn to Weatherby, the historian, to come up with something everyone can agree on:

Tenure of Gov. James Risch. May 26, 2006, to Dec. 31, 2006. "We really hadn't seen the governor's office used that way."

Their words

Laird Noh

- Connection: The longtime chairman of the Senate Natural Resources Committee, Noh, a sheep farmer from Kimberly, served with Risch for 14 years in the Idaho Senate.

- What he said: "He has a greater appreciation for the outdoors and environment than most people know about."

Wendy Jaquet

- Connection: Leader of Idaho's 19 House Democrats, Jaquet helped lead the fight against Risch's tax shift this summer.

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- What she said: "He's definitely the Energizer Bunny. He was a huge contrast to the previous administration."

Bruce Newcomb

- Connection: Recently retired, the four-term House speaker worked closely with Risch while he served in Senate leadership. Newcomb's wife, former legislator Celia Gould, ran against Risch in the 2002 GOP lieutenant governor primary.

- What he said: "In the Senate, he was very much like he was as governor, very much in control."

Clint Stennett

- Connection: The leader of the Senate Democrats, Stennett went toe-to-toe with Risch during his tenure in the Senate. Stennett led a Democratic protest during the one-day special session, employing several procedural tactics to delay passage of Risch's property tax bill.

- What he said: "Homeowners will quickly figure out, and have already begun to figure out, that this was all smoke and mirrors."

Steve Ahrens

- Connection: Ahrens covered Risch as the political editor of the Idaho Statesman in Boise and worked with him during his tenure as executive director of the state's most influential business lobby, the Idaho Association of Commerce & Industry.

- What he said: "Risch's accomplishments these seven months hold up against any recent governor."

Bart Davis

- Connection: Davis served in Senate leadership while Risch finished out his Senate tenure as that body's majority leader. Davis has said Risch helped groom him for that job.

- What he said: "He was going to squeeze four years of being governor into eight or nine months, and doggone it, he's come close."